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FYI -- From today's EnergyWire . . .

HYDRAULIC FRACTURING: Republican senators slam EPA's delay on Pavillion report

Ellen M. Gilmer, E&E reporter

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U.S. EPA is facing renewed pressure from Capitol Hill to re-evaluate a high-profile investigation of groundwater contamination from hydraulic fracturing operations in Wyoming.

In a letter today to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, Republican Sens. David Vitter of Louisiana and James Inhofe of Oklahoma panned the agency for recently announcing plans to delay its work on the case for eight months.

The senators called the delay "staggering" and said it serves only to keep misinformation in the public discussion on fracking, a well stimulation technique that blasts millions of gallons of chemical-laced water

and sand deep underground to access oil and gas.

In late 2011, EPA released a draft report on the Pavillion, Wyo., case, finding that fluid from fracking was not present in drinking water but was present in deeper groundwater. This resounded among environmental activists who had long been decrying the contamination risks of fracking.

But the results were heavily contested. EPA drilled two monitoring wells, one of which was rejected for further testing by the U.S. Geological Survey because of low flow rates (EnergyWire, Dec. 7, 2012).

Industry dismissed EPA's work as sloppy and inconclusive, a sentiment echoed in the senators' letter to Jackson, which said the findings were "hastily rushed out the door for political purposes."

"Friday's announcement allows the Agency's unsubstantiated claims to remain unchecked in order to justify an Administration-wide effort to hinder and unnecessarily regulate hydraulic fracturing on the federal level," they wrote.

The delay came as unwelcome news to nearly all stakeholders in Wyoming. A spokesman for Encana Oil & Gas (USA) Inc., the driller charged with contaminating the groundwater, said the delay was a disservice to all involved, while grass-roots organizers in the area said EPA's Washington, D.C., headquarters were hindering the work done by EPA's Denver-based Region 8 office (E&ENews PM, Jan. 10).

The agency maintains that it opted to delay the investigation in order to allow for more public comment and evaluate new data.

EPA is also working on a nationwide study into the safety of fracking, which critics say cannot be trusted considering the agency's testing methods in Pavillion. A final report is expected in late 2014.

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